

**NEWMAN AND THE COMMON TRADITION. A Study in the Language of Church and Society, by John Coulson. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970. 279 pp. £2.50 (50s.).**

This book is one of the best pieces of ecumenical theology to have appeared in recent years. There have been very few genuinely theological examinations of the central Christian questions that have also been thoroughly and explicitly ecumenical. John Coulson has provided us with a model of how to approach the problems. His axiom is that, by digging below the surface of traditional differences, instead of trying to build bridges at ground level, we shall simply *find* the common ground we seek.

Granted this axiom, the choice of Newman as a subject of special study seems inevitable. After all, he is the only English writer of the very first rank to have lived fully and maturely in both Roman and Anglican worlds and contributed decisively to both. But it also seems inevitable to see F. D. Maurice in relation to Newman, not only because he appears to us now to have been the most alert Anglican thinker of the Victorian age, but because he saw his own work as a kind of 'digging' for foundations. What is really original in the present study is the attempt to show the extent of the debt both men owed to Coleridge for ideas about the nature of faith, of theological language and of the relation of the church to secular culture. Dr Coulson seems to me to have established the fact of a 'common tradition' linking all three men in a definitive manner. Newman the disciple of Coleridge is a far more plausible figure than Newman the existentialist, or some of the other Newmans that continental scholars have offered us recently. As a study in the history of ideas, this book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the nineteenth-century theological scene.

In the course of this 'digging' valuable new points are made about all three authors. The most interesting, to my mind, is the suggestion that the apparent obscurity of Coleridge is largely due to his having been read in a literary instead of a religious way. His use of key terms, like 'idea', is intelligible only if we recognize that they are for him primarily theological terms, and derive their literary value only from that prior source. Coleridge's theoretical contribution to the understanding of poetic language comes from his religious preoccupations. I am not enough of an expert on Coleridge to be able to judge the validity of this claim,

but it is worth looking at seriously and Dr Coulson has put literary critics in his debt for making it.

Two points of some substance seem to me perhaps too sketchily treated. The first is the alleged parallel between Coleridge's theory of language and that of the later Wittgenstein. As it stands, the introduction of Wittgenstein, especially at the beginning of Chapter 2, almost looks like cashing in on a philosophical contemporary in order to make the preoccupations of nineteenth-century thinkers appear relevant to those of the twentieth. Surely some discussion should have been given to the problems attaching to what Kai Nielsen has called Wittgenstein's 'fideism': that is to say, the idea he seems to have espoused that all uses of language are equally legitimate once they have been understood, and that only a person who accepts the rules of a language-game for himself is able to play that game. Thus unbelievers are automatically excluded from criticizing theological talk since they can't understand it. Such a view may have been congenial to Coleridge, but it would have been rejected by Newman. Whether Wittgenstein held or implied it, the fact that he has been thus interpreted is important to the discussion of his rôle in the argument that is being pursued in the book.

My second query concerns the relation of Newman to the theology of Vatican II. Dr Coulson establishes, very clearly, how Newman anticipated that theology. But he does not establish the degree of his influence upon it. Surely the theologians who mattered at the council owed their insights to a much wider and more diffuse movement of thought that has overtaken Europe and America since the turn of the century? Maritainian Thomism, German Existentialism and American Pragmatism were more important than the English 'common tradition'—worse luck, since a dose of Newman's thought would have done a power of good and an infusion of his style would have done wonders to the prose of the committees. Of course, in the long run this doesn't matter; but it is relevant to the argument of the book. How important is the 'common tradition' stemming from Coleridge, in its bearing upon our own concerns? Is Newman a seminal influence or an admirable but iso-

lated genius? How significant is he in the history of his own period, or of ours? In the history of *ideas* he obviously ranks high. But in the history of the Church's development, or that of the world? I am not sure, and here Dr Coulson has not helped me much.

Two other questions remain in my mind. The first is this. Given that (unlike Maurice and Coleridge) Newman's first concern was always with, How do we know that the Christian case is true?, and that all his books were attempts to answer that basic question in contemporary terms, is it not necessary for the student of Newman to face the question of how far Newman's own answers are still valid today? Isn't this the question Newman himself would have wished theological scholars to put first? In what sense is his appeal to conscience as indicative, if not exactly probative, of God's existence an answer to modern scepticism? How far is his theory of language as 'fiduciary' an adequate reply to twentieth-century, as distinct from nineteenth-century, rationalism? What exactly is the cash value of his work? (The chapters on Newman in H. H. Price's *Gifford Lectures on Belief* are relevant here, but they are not discussed in this book.)

But there is an even bigger question to ask of an argument which 'is chiefly of value if it can be shown to have significance for the present day' (p. 225). This is how far Newman's preoccupation with the theology of the Church is useful or even interesting to us. The trouble is that, even if we grant everything that Dr Coulson wants to establish about the Christian value of the open pluralistic society, about the importance of the university as a

community of balanced, autonomous disciplines that provides a model for the Church itself, and about the difference between acting from conscience and acting from 'social motives' (and to grant all this is to grant much), the *whole* of that discussion seems now to be rather provincial, almost a storm in a teacup. What does Newman's theology of the Church say to Vorster or Castro, Nixon or the Greek Colonels, Helder Camara or the Berrigans? What relevance has the *Idea of a University* to a society tempted to think of the Open University as the answer to its educational problems? How does the justification of theology as a focal, but not domineering, discipline help us over the Snow-Leavis controversy, let alone over the California Board of Regents or the 'Atkinson affair' at Birmingham? What does Newman's vision do to solve the questions raised by the sacking of the editor of this very journal?

Let it be clear that I am not being a philistine in raising these crude questions. I do not dispute the intrinsic value of historical scholarship, or its long-term relevance in practical affairs. It is simply that this book, which is devoted to the thesis of Newman's contemporary relevance, does not itself make clear exactly what the relevance of Newman is to the central questions today—questions which are less of ecclesiastical organization or historical enquiry than of life and death for Christianity itself. I do not question that what Newman says is important: I just want to know more clearly in what this importance consists. Having laid the foundations of a 'common tradition' I hope Dr Coulson will be able to go on to show us where it leads us.

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THE VICTORIAN CHURCH IN DECLINE, by P. T. Marsh. *Routledge and Kegan Paul*, London, 1966. 344 pp. £2.80 (56s.).

In spite of the sometimes threatening situation during the first half of the century, the Anglican Church remained comparatively strong and secure as a result of such factors as the administrative reforms of the Ecclesiastical Commission and the religious revival associated with the Oxford Movement. In 1868, the establishment and many of its privileges still survived, but by the 1880s, the Church had lost several of these privileges especially in the field of education, the importance of religion was declining among the educated and public opinion was again critical if not contemptuous.

Parliament not only ignored the fact of establishment but even the Church itself and refused to adopt legislation which its leaders considered necessary while denying them the authority to govern themselves.

Yet between 1868 and 1882, the Archbishop of Canterbury was probably the most powerful since the seventeenth century. The present work is an excellent attempt to give an account of this paradoxical situation and to describe Tait's public career. As archbishop, he was involved with ecclesiastical reform under Gladstone and Disraeli, especially the dis-